

UNLEASHING THE POWER OF CREATIVE COLLABORATION

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"Powers or resources not yet developed" is the dictionary definition of potential. Applied to physics, it means latent energy waiting to be used. Applied to a work force it means untapped talents, ideas and contributive strengths waiting to be switched on. No company uses more than a fraction of its work force's total potential. The companies that do best today are the ones that find means to use a larger fraction than their competitors. That is their edge in the new global economy.

And they get that edge by taking action based on two fundamental principles:

1. Rely on human potential as central to your corporate strategy.
2. Liberate that potential through creative collaboration.

A company's competitiveness is a combination of the potential of its people, the quality of the information that people possess, and a willingness to share knowledge with others in the organization. The leadership challenge is to link these components as tightly as possible. I can assure you that there is a lot of untapped potential in your organization (or team or staff) waiting to be liberated, and knowledge waiting to be shared. And to prove it, I'll tell you a few success stories about how companies are using creative collaboration to tap into that potential. Because, when it comes to communicating the power of collaboration, few strategies have proved more effective than the finding and telling of the right stories. . .

WHO IS THAT GUY AT THE BACK OF THE ROOM? How Bob Buckman reinforced a knowledge-sharing culture based on trust.

Buckman Laboratories has been in the specialty chemical business since 1945. Under the leadership of Robert H. (Bob) Buckman, it also became a world-class, knowledge-sharing organization. Bob would tell you that converting a command-and-control organization into a networked one was not without its challenges and setbacks. Still, by 1994, Buckman Labs had jumped into full-bore knowledge sharing: new software and connectivity had been installed, most of the associates were equipped with laptops, and online Forums were up and running. To honor and reward the top 150 people from around the world who had done the best job of sharing knowledge with the new technologies, a "Fourth Wave Meeting" was held in Scottsdale, Arizona. The meeting was three days of fun, celebration and work - specifically, critical discussions about business trends and strategies. It was also the setting for the following story:

Through the entire conference, a man wearing shorts, a T-shirt, and sandals sat at the back of the room, chronicling the meeting on his laptop and sending live messages onto the Forum for the rest of the company to read. His name was Mark Koskiniemi. About midway through the meeting, one of the organizers (a manager) approached Mark and asked him to stop sending out notes on the meeting. Mark refused by saying he didn't feel that was appropriate. When the organizer suggested that the request to cease came from the top, Mark countered by saying he'd appreciate hearing it personally.

A few minutes later, a break was called, and Mark found himself face-to-face with Bob Buckman. Here is how Mark recalls the conversation:

Mark: Hello, sir.

Bob: Mark, I understand that you have been posting notes from the meeting on the Forum. I have to say that I have not read them, but are you sure that is such a good idea?

Mark: Do you trust me?

Bob broke into a big smile, nodded slightly, and nothing further was said about Mark's continued reporting of the events.

There were two results from Koskiniemi's reporting:

1. In all, he sent more than 50 Forum or e-mail messages related to the reports coming from the meeting.
2. Koskiniemi (who is now head of Buckman's operation in Australia and New Zealand) experienced the power of trust: "If knowledge sharing is built on trust, then to me this moment over any other demonstrated that Bob Buckman really trusted the associates of Buckman Laboratories to take the company forward."

Lessons:

- o Trust is the foundation for collaboration. It is the conduit through which knowledge flows. Without trust, an organization loses its emotional "glue." In a culture of suspicion people withhold information, hide behind psychological walls, withdraw from participation.

- o Trust is a two-way street. Leaders must be trusted -- but they also must trust. Encouraging employee participation and responsibility requires a deep belief in the potential of workers to make responsible decisions. And to prepare for making responsible decisions, people must be entrusted with information, resources, support, encouragement, responsibility, and authority.

BECOMING A LEARNING ORGANIZATION: How After Action Reviews drive knowledge- sharing and innovation at J.M. Huber Corporation.

May 2, 2003 at the J.M. Huber Corporation headquarters in Edison, New Jersey, was marked by a special occasion - the Breakfast of Champions and the presentation of the Chairman's Award for After Action Review (AAR) Excellence. That morning, Board Chair, President and Chief Executive Officer Peter Francis handed the coveted award, a handsome glass globe and engraved plaque, to the cross-functional team that had earned it.

When Francis presented the award to the deserving team, he remarked: "I selected this team because they fully integrated the AAR process into their project plan, using AARs to implement a critically important system on time, within budget, and with an exceptional level of quality. The team avoided 'recreating the wheel' by applying lessons learned from other teams. They also contributed to Huber's knowledge base by providing new lessons learned that others at Huber can apply in the future."

AARs? What are they? And why are they so vitally important to this successful, multinational, privately held company?

The After Action Review (AAR) was developed by the United States Army during the 1970s to help American soldiers learn from their mistakes and from their correct judgment. Basically, the AAR process assembles people who were involved in a planned project or an unscheduled event and asks them to answer three questions:

1. What happened?
2. Why did it happen?
3. What should we do about it?

Central to the process at Huber is a sophisticated database that captures, stores, reminds and reports on accumulated learning. To conduct an AAR, employees can download an information-gathering template that also helps to guide the face-to-face discussions that are the basis of the AAR. After employees answer the three basic questions, they can input their learning and post it immediately to the database. Other employees around the world can search the database to find AARs on topics related to their work.

In just a few years, Huber transformed itself from a company that was just starting its own AAR process to one that is embedding it solidly into the culture. In 2002, Huber employees conducted more than 2,000 AARs - against a goal of 1,000 for the year. As the number of AARs has steadily increased over the years, the quality and value of the AARs has improved, too. Huber employees completed over 90 percent of the action items they committed to in their 2002 AARs - greater than the stated target. Now more than half of all AARs conducted focus on the company's Critical Success Factors, aligning learning with areas of strategic importance to the company.

Lessons:

- o Create an environment for learning with the following key elements: demonstrated support from senior leadership; a safe environment for honest self-evaluation; a standard, consistent process that is easily accessible, convenient and useful for all employees; ongoing communication and training to reinforce the learning message.

- o Print out and pin up on your wall the following statement from W. Edwards Deming: "Learning is not compulsory... neither is survival."

EMPLOYEE COMMUNICATIONS IN THE PIAZZA: How Caterpillar created an environment in which employees from many different backgrounds and cultures came together.

At Caterpillar's European headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland, employees represent a mixture of nationalities from all over the world. While essential for a successful global operation, this diversity complicates communications: not only are employees dealing with multiple languages and backgrounds, they're interacting with people who come from very different communication cultures. The challenge was how to make this diverse population begin to think of themselves as a team.

A few years ago, Employee Communication Manager Gottardo Bontagnali kept thinking about the role played by the central market square -- "piazza" in Italian -- in virtually all European villages. In addition to going there for necessities of daily life, villagers went there to exchange news, pick up gossip, pass on information and socialize. It was, and still is in many places, the village's most efficient communications tool.

So Bontagnali decided to create a "piazza" at Caterpillar's Geneva headquarters, based on the village theme. Local artists were brought in to paint the walls of the top-floor cafeteria with large village scenes -- dotted with bright yellow Cat machines, of course -- as well as sights from multiple Cat locations. And the villagers portrayed in the panoramas were actual Cat employees. The result was amazing: with a little imagination, you could actually picture yourself in a European market square surrounded by familiar faces and sights.

Employees were then encouraged to use the "piazza" for informal meetings and discussions. "Let's discuss it over a cup of coffee in the Piazza" has now become part of the Caterpillar's business culture in Geneva. And because so many people use it for regular exchanges, it's become an important means of sharing information on an impromptu basis as well. But the most impressive result is how workplace design helped build work force camaraderie and a common sense of purpose.

Lessons:

- o Look at how your workplace layout encourages or impedes the way the organization communicates. To facilitate collaboration, you need to create social environments that stimulate both arranged and chance conversations. Attractive break-out areas, coffee bars, comfortable cafeteria chairs, even wide landings on staircases - all of these increase the likelihood that employees will encounter one another and linger to talk.

- o Human beings thrive in communities. When Bill Beddow, manager of Corporate Communications and Corporate Public Affairs, first told me this Caterpillar story, he said it reminded him of a particular episode in his favorite TV show, Northern Exposure: "In the small town of Cicely, Alaska, the local laundromat played the same role as the European piazza. One of the characters, Maggie, buys a home washer/dryer for convenience, but little by little realizes that the technology has cut her off from one of the most important social conventions of Cicely life. So she eventually returns the appliances and resumes her 'inconvenient' weekly treks to the village coin laundry. It was the most wonderful and unforgettable episode!"

THE MORAL OF THE STORIES

With one exception, success in today's global economy boils down to the single, universally recognized objective of getting more for less. The exception is human resource. Human labor is not a disposable commodity. It is a unique creative resource for the future of the organization. You can't devalue workers and expect to come out ahead. If you give people less, they give less back. If you treat them like underlings, they behave like underlings. Offer them more, on the other hand, and they repay you with interest. I'm not talking about money now. I'm talking about liberating untapped potential, about energizing employees and engaging their commitment and enthusiasm.

Give people a chance to grow and they will blossom. Entrust them with greater authority and they will take on greater responsibility. Educate them to understand the changing business dynamics and they will make excellent business decisions. Encourage them to collaborate, and they will amaze you with their inventiveness. Treat them like full partners in the organization and they will participate like owners. Make human potential the corporate strategy and your company will be ready for the new business age.

This article is from "THIS ISN'T THE COMPANY I JOINED" -- How to Lead in a Business Turned Upside Down by Carol Kinsey Goman, Ph.D. (KCS Publishing, 2004). Carol coaches executives, facilitates management retreats, helps change teams develop strategies, and delivers keynote speeches and seminars to association and business audiences around the world. She can be reached by phone: 510-526-1727, email: CGoman@CKG.com, or through her website: www.CKG.com.

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